WORKER VS GREENIE

By Georgios Alexandrou

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WORKER vs GREENIE

Is the concept/ struggle for workplace control of the means of production somehow mutually exclusive to the green movement? Are workers and the concerns of the 'environment movement' somehow two diametrically opposing forces? Is direct blockading the solution? Should we look to the government to intervene on our behalf?

Some argue that a revolutionary movement that aims to build mass unions from the ground up is destined to failure. Or worse still, that a mass organisation of people is doomed to tyranny and authoritarianism (much like the events following the 1917 Russian Revolution). Is the idea of worker control and mass worker organisations somehow diametrically opposed to or a threat to the more small scale group dynamic such as child care, food co-ops, housing co-ops, communal living, or single issue discussion groups? Some argue still that workers in a uranium mine (or any other industry that is generally accepted as ecologically disastrous) who may decide to organise, as a class, to take over the means of production may then themselves continue to operate such industry following a revolutionary uprising or general strike. Thus the notion that worker control and the green movement can in fact be mutually exclusive.

True, workers that seize control of industry may continue to operate the plastic crap making factory or fuel nuclear reactors. I am not denying that it can happen. On the contrary, I am abdicating worker control of industry and community control of community affairs without governments or councils or even the rich deciding on behalf of 'the people' simply because it is their workplace and or community. Who owns the bulk of industry? Who can hire and fire when and how they choose? Who pays whom a set wage and skims the profit for themself? Who is in the minority yet possesses the majority of wealth? I am abdicating worker control solely because if

workers produce everything we eat, see, and use then surely it is they that should have the right to decide on issues pertaining to the point of production. Since when did politicians become gifted experts on the postal industry to know that a mass retrenchment of postal workers is best for the postal industry. Is that why I now have to put up with one in five letters sent to my PO BOX being the wrong letter in the wrong box due to an over worked and underpaid postal worker. Since when did rich housing developers become experts on community issues to declare community hospitals and public schools obsolete. Dave Kerin puts it this way in his essay 'Challenging the Myths of Jobs vs Environment'. "Do workers have a democratic right to make decisions about what we produce, whether we produce and the ways in which we produce? Or alternatively, was this right something which only belonged to the propertied, to people who owned commodities other than their ability to work, which they could sell in the market place?."

This then draws the argument, "but what if the workers decide to run the environmentally bad industry but the community is opposed!" Correct me if I'm wrong, but generally speaking in a mining town (or logging town for that matter), is it not miners (loggers) and their families that make up the bulk of their respective communities? In an urban situation, such as the proposed Niddrie waste dump located in Melbourne's outer western suburbs, the workers who may be employed in the waste dump are in fact a minority compared to the thousands of people living, working, or farming in the immediate surrounding area. And yes, there quite possibly is a conflict of opinion between workers and residents surrounding the proposed site and potential employees at the site. But when was the community ever provided with the means to decide what sort of jobs it wished to create? A job is a job in anyone's language. I'm not arguing that workers that take such jobs in environmentally hazardous industries should quit. On the contrary, I argue that such industries should not exist, but not at the expense of the livelihood of workers in such indus-

tries. To do so would make me elitist and selfish and create a division between me and a worker in such industries. Putting someone out of work does nothing to challenge the power structure in place, namely the ruling class and governments. It merely makes the job of those in power easier by encouraging working people and 'greenies' to fight against each other. Divide and rule.

I would like to depart from this dilemma and launch straight into a dialogue between two fictional characters.

A Dialogue between two fictious people!

Zeus: I can relate to your argument about the desirability of worker controlled and operated industry and workplaces, but I cannot see how the bad practices such as seen in the nuclear/chemical industries will be eradicated just because the industries are taken over by the workers?

Athena: Any bunch of workers can band together and possibly even buy out their factory/workplace from the boss and run their workplace. In fact, this is a legal process which falls under the Co-operatives Act, Incorporation Act, or just by having a partnership of bosses (workers) instead of one boss. When I speak of worker control, I am referring to a revolutionary change in class consciousness and power. I am referring to a complete breakdown of the economic, political, and social order. Hospitals, factories, offices, Mines, schools, research, military, prisons, the legal/parliamentary system, parks, indigenous representation (ie: ATSIC). Every process that falls under government/corporate scrutiny or control.

Zeus: Yeah, but, let's take prisons for example. So under workers control, will there still be prisons? But instead of prisons run by a warden, they will be run by the guards? Will the free workers mine uranium?

Athena: Prisons. Interesting point. Uranium mines exist because people require uranium for energy. However, people require prisons and uranium because such industries are placed upon them under current economic, social, and political climates. If you live in Roxby Downs (SA), then chances are your only source of employment

is the nearby uranium mine. It is natural for a mine worker or prison guard to not wish to give up their employment. In fact, I would say it is criminal to deny them their right to make a living.

Uranium is mined simply because it makes someone rich, not because it is a rational, safe, or ecologically sound form of energy. When I speak of worker control, I refer to the right and choice of workers to create industry, services, and structures that benefit human need, not individual greed. Let me elaborate. Uranium mining, dangerous chemical production, and all other bad work practices will continue simply because it makes money for those with the power and money. As long as research funding is under the wing of the government and big business, not worker control, then how the hell is alternative energy such as solar, wind, and hydro, etc going to hit off. How will a sewerage recycling plant take off if the government and rich won't fund it or even offer research grants to scientists. Even then we have the problem that scientists do not control their work place. If you, as a scientist, were asked to research genetic engineered food and you research funding was provided by genetic engineering billion dollar multinational corporations such as Monsanto, then how pressured would you feel in losing your grant if you produced a report that was not in favour of Monsanto. Your job could be at risk. Of course, many, if not most scientists are probably honest people, but I am merely making the point as to the economic and power relationship between a worker and the ruling class.

An individual who still wishes to mine uranium can go right ahead as far as I am concerned. But what community would want it, if they, as a community under

worker control, are in control deciding how they wish to create energy. Would you want a nuclear reactor, or coal derived electricity, if you knew you community could generate energy form gas derived from treated sewerage, solar energy, wind generation, or a million other ways that are hidden under government red tape and patents filed away in some multinational corporation's safe. If you knew the money was there to fund alternatives without strings attached or loss of jobs, then you could make an informed choice. If there is no market for polluting/ undesirable work practices, then why would anyone want it? Why would anyone have to be employed in such practices if they had choice and were not forced due to economic circumstance. What's the point in free workers mining uranium if self-managed communities don't want nuclear powered reactors in the first place? Who needs nuclear energy when workers in energy related industries can make free agreements with self managed communities as to sound alternative energy systems. But how can a worker in such 'unsound' industries or a community in areas affected by the products of the 'unsound' industry make a free choice as to what 'they' would rather be doing when one hand is tied behind their back due to political, social, and economic pressures. Will the multinational corporation all of a sudden remove their funding from the local hospital or sports club? Will the government then provide the community with replacement jobs should the 'bad' industry close down? Could you make an informed choice under these circumstances if it was your job at stake?

Zeus: Ok, I can see the fact that with economic freedom workers will at least have a choice in the running of society. That they will not be dictated at or threatened with unemployment from any boss. But what if working peo-

ple become the new rulers?

Athena: If you deny the potential in humanity if they are freed from the curse of economic dependency on the rich. If you deny the potential in prisoners (most of whom are in prison for economic crimes and drug related crimes not anti social violent crimes such as rape and murder). If you deny that people are smart enough to work out the problems that exist or may crop up without cops, judges, and politicians deciding for them, then you should look at yourself and ask yourself, is freedom possible. If this scares you, or leaves a foul taste in your

Earthworker is a caucus of trade union and environmental organisations' members coming together under the auspices of Victorian Trades Hall Council in the recognition that workers' rights and concern for the environment are a common issue.

Earthworker
P O Box 285
Carlton Sth
Vic 3053

email: earthworker@earthworker.org.au

website: www.earthworker.org.au

mouth, then maybe you are wasting your time asking me for an answer.

What is important, I believe, is who has the access to power. Upon whom does social, political, and economic control rest? The state? The ruling class? Apart from voting at election time every 3 to 4 years in Federal, State, or Council elections, what decision making power does the common worker have in the day to day running of society? The Black Panther Party Of Self Defence (a revolutionary Afro American organisation operating in the USA in the late 60's to the early 70's) made an interesting point with regards to combating police/pig brutality. They argued for community control of police. In other words, if the cops were gonna patrol black neighbourhoods then the black community the police patrolled should have every right to decide who they want and who they don't want. Was police accountability to the community too much to ask for? The United States government and it's policing agencies definitely found such a scenario highly distasteful, and begun what can only be described as a war against Afro Americans. Afro American victims (Prisoners Of War) of this covert operation can still be found in prisons across the USA to this very day, a quarter of a century later. Mumia Abu Jamal (currently on death row) is one example.

If your council decided to generate electricity in your locality from a nuclear reactor, what choice would you have but to use nuclear powered electricity? What else could you do? Boycott the electricity supply? Fork out thousands you just don't have to rig up a solar panel to your home? Build a hydroelectric power station that offers minimal environmental impact to your local creek to power your local suburb? Where are you gonna find the millions of dollars to fund such a novel idea? Are you gonna request permission from the electrical suppliers to allow you or your community to access the power lines to rig up your hydroelectric set up? Are you just gonna ring up your local councillor and request they turn their

back on their rich biddies from the privatised energy companies and legislate your right to alternative power in order to boycott the nuclear reactor generated electricity? Are workers in the nuclear reactor just gonna walk off the job and work for free in your hydro power station for no money? If only politicians and the ruling class were so benevolent.

Direct action campaigning (ie: to halt rain forest logging) or asking the state to intervene to close such industries down are two common methods used by the wider green movement to combat the offensive waged against the environment. In the periodical 'Anarcho-Syndicalist Review' #25, Jeffrey Shantz states in his article titled '*Beyond Productivism: Syndicalism &Ecology*' the dilemma faced by any worker. "The absence of workers' control allows coercion of workers into the performance of tasks which they might otherwise disdain, or which have consequences of which they are kept uninformed. Also, the absence of self-determination results in workers competing with each other over jobs. Workers are thus susceptible to threats of capital strike and environmental blackmail (Bullard [(2)], 1990). This susceptibility is perhaps the greatest deterrent alliances between labour and ecologists. Without job security and workplace power, workers cannot provide an effective counterbalance to the power of capital [(1)]".

I am not arguing that direct action or state intervention are ineffective. In fact, there are instances where they are effective in stopping certain projects. The disruptions to the proposed Franklins Dam in Tasmania is one example. Lobbying in the 1970's and 1980's was instrumental in shaping Labor's policy towards uranium mining. Labor compromised and decided on a 3 mines policy, which meant that once the three existing uranium mines had mined out their uranium then uranium mining would cease as such in Australia. However, decades later, with the Liberal party in power, Australia looks like it will open up scores of uranium mines as we enter the new millennium. Honeymoon -

and Beverly are already operational and Jabiluka looks set to start. The green bans enforced by the Builders Labourers Federation meant that particular rainforest timber was not imported into Australia for a brief period of time and saved numerous parks and buildings from being turned into car parks. The NEEFA and GECO forest blockades in NSW and Victorian rainforests are definitely slowing down the capitalist onslaught on native forests, but are not offering residents in such areas employed in such industries any concrete alternatives. Education about alternatives to rainforest stripping such as plantation timber hemp plantations are great, and may even be supported by workers in the forest industry, but are meaningless because such great alternatives cannot happen as long as the land and wealth are controlled by the capitalist machine. Who is gonna put food on the logger's table? The company wage or the blockaders? Even if blockading or state intervention closes down environmentally hazardous industries, it does not necessarily mean they will not open up elsewhere or be replaced by another equally destructive industry.

Direct action and state intervention are important, I believe, in the sense that they give the earth an extension on it's capitalist incurred death sentence. Lobbying and direct action can also empower people to strive for bigger and better things. Campaigning against a freeway in one's neighbourhood may open up an individual to ideas and people that individual had previously not experienced. Who knows. Maybe the idea of a world without bosses and rulers may even become desirable to more and more people.

As a revolutionary unionist, I argue that unless workers in such industry seize control of their workplace, then blockades and state intervention are merely band-aid approaches. Power and control remain unchecked. The rich will still own the vast wealth of the earth and governments will continue to run riot hidden under bureaucratic agencies and miles of red tape and legislation. "To strike for ecological protection, however, requires that workers

develop a position of strength. This means organising workers against the prospects of "job versus environment" blackmail. In order for this to occur, non-unionised workers must be mobilised. (Otherwise they will be mobilised by capital - as scabs). (1)"

As a concluding remark, I wish to acknowledge that the soil upon which this publication is written and published is in fact Aboriginal land. A continent that was seized brutally in 1788 and subsequently colonised. Indigenous Australians have not received much mention in this publication not because I do not recognise their contribution to problems affecting Australia as well as globalisation, but instead, because I wished to make this publication as general as possible. After all, are not many Aboriginal Australians 'workers-wage earners' as well as 'greenies-respectful of the earth'? Though this publication is predominantly about class (worker vs employer), the unique circumstances regarding dispossession of Indigenous Australians from

Green camp attack

By MICHELLE POUNTNEY, environment reporter

THREE logging protesters were slightly injured yesterday when their East Gippsland camp was attacked.

The camp in the Goolengook forest was allegedly attacked by about 50 loggers.

The violence came 12 hours after an Aboriginal elder evicted loggers and Department of Natural Resources and Environment officers from a logging coupe in the forest.

"You didn't plant these old growth forests; you've got no right to harvest them," Aboriginal elder Robbie Thorpe said.

An Aboriginal spokeswoman said the State Government should take action over the attack.

"Conservationists demand that the minister for conservation take control of the situation before serious injury or death occur on the front line," Goongerah Environment Centre spokeswoman Shelly Nundra said.

Graeme Gooding, executive director of the Victorian Association of Forest Industries, said the attack was in retaliation for an alleged assault on a logger and damage to a car.

"Workers have had to endure months of constant anonymous phone threats against their wives and children," he said.

"We certainly do not condone any form of violence whether it is perpetrated by greens or timber workers as the way to resolve the forest debate."

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